



Robert Bassler, *Tetrahedron/Atlantic Coast, Georgia*, 1987. Acrylic on board, carved plexiglass, painted steel, 16 x 22 x 20 in.



Ana Mendieta, *Guanbancex (Goddess of the Wind/Diosa del viento)*, 1981. Esculturas Rupestres, 41 x 53 in., Cueva del Agua, Escaleras de Jaruco, Havana, Cuba.

CALIFORNIA

Robert Bassler

Wenger Gallery, Los Angeles

Robert Bassler's sculptures have always originated in the realm of intuition, from something inexplicable, sometimes mundane, that grips the artist: a cliff wall or a highway barrier, the tetrahedral pyramid, or photos of the earth taken from space.

Once this impulse is set in motion, Bassler proceeds like a scientist, dissecting, reorganizing, stripping bare every possible conceptual and formal angle and exploring every possible permutation the subject has to offer. He begins, like a spiritualist, from what he calls "some metaphysical pull," then undertakes an exacting, comprehensive analysis that whittles away at an object's surface and at our preconceptions to disclose some basic internal structure. Perhaps the most interesting thing about Bassler's work is that it takes itself full circle; his methodical analysis ends up unveiling certain ineffable truths we can intuit but never really articulate.

A recent exhibition of Bassler's work at the Wenger Gallery in Los Angeles demonstrated this process. Inspired by the tetrahedral pyramid and photos of the earth's land and atmosphere, the new work seems in spirit and approach an extension of the earlier cliff wall and barricade series. In this earlier work, Bassler explored the concept of "containment" expressed in a cliff and a highway barricade. He passed through various exhaustive explorations in carved wood, carved plexiglass, photography and xerography to reduce the two barriers to their most basic conceptual and formal common denominators: interactions of light, optical/perceptual/tactile events which by their very ephemeral nature are the antithesis

of all we associate with "barrier" (i.e., firmness, permanence). If there is science to Bassler's work, there is also an equal portion of yogic philosophy.

The same odd, effective combination of transcendentalism and empiricism comes through in the new works. Bassler begins with the tetrahedron, viewed as the "perfect" stable geometric form, as well as with photos of our planet taken from space. In a series of freestanding sculptures, some as large as four feet, some as small as 15 inches, he composes powerful objects that move compositionally from the inside out. At the centers of these pieces are three-sided pyramids constructed of materials ranging from etched plexiglass, acrylic-painted hardboard, and wood slats. Successive "layers" of tetrahedral shapes overlay this core.

In *Atmospheric Pyramid*, the innermost pyramid is formed of plexiglass carved to echo the billowy, milky skies or cloud masses covering the earth. This fragile-looking volume is enclosed in a tightly fitting steel armature that echoes its shape exactly. A third "layer" is formed by yet another steel tetrahedron, but this one hovers at some distance from the other two with its apex slightly opened as if to let in light or let out information and energy. Looking through the three transparent sides we can see shadows cast by different parts of the piece onto itself, we can see through the piece to its metal "skins," so that as you look at any one part of the sculpture you see its whole. The piece begins with the concept of "earth" and translates it, via formally refined, complex visual metaphors, into "release and containment," "opening and closing," "revelation and concealment"—processes that in some inexpressible way define the essence of the planet.

In *Interspatial Pyramid*, the internal tetrahedron is made of neatly methodical slats of wood, the subsequent pyramid of wood slats again opens slightly at its apex, the third reduces to three disconnected triangles shaped of steel that appear to support, to release, or to restrict the compositional core. Again the work operates on several levels. It is fine technical work, minimal and pristine. Mathematically and geometrically, the notion of infinite progression is suggested. On a perceptual level the carefully arranged slats interact to create moire patterns that, as the viewer casually moves around the piece, give the illusion of quick surface movement. There's a bit of sophisticated irony in the fact that this motion—the most tangible "reality" this refined, attenuated piece offers—is itself an illusion with no factual basis.

The more intimate wall sculptures are formed hardboard tetrahedrons mounted at their base and painted in bright, smoldering acrylics to echo the churning, often violent patterns the earth, water and atmosphere make when viewed from afar. These pieces are less conceptual than the freestanding sculptures and don't hold their promise of translating into impressive environmental works, but they make up for this with a romantic, brutal randomness that is fresh and foreign in Bassler's style. Just like the mind-boggling precision and repetition of the large sculpture *Infinite Fractal Pyramid*, the small painterly works remind us that for every impulse toward cohesion, the mental and cosmic landscape offers an opposite and equal impulse toward unfathomable expansion.

—Marlena Donobue